

2005

New Readings

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New Readings

By

Lee, Gi Dong

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA Imaging Arts
COLLEGE OF IMAGING ARTS SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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New Readings

BY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the search for a creative process for my photographic studies over the past two years at Rochester Institute of Technology. It explains the thought behind the artwork such as why I am interested in the genre of still life, inspiration, process, and my future artistic goals.

The subject matter of my thesis exhibition motivated me to explore the world of still life. By painting on an object, my imagery has evolved into a new reading that led to a new interpretation of the still life both physically and psychologically. My thesis images emphasize a new aesthetic experience not usually associated with traditional still life photography.

In my graduate studies, I have come to know that I need the freedom to explore and to risk failure.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to say “thank you” to Therese Mulligan, Ph.D., my thesis chair, and committee members, Willie Osterman and Angela Kelly. Dr. Therese Mulligan has introduced me to a lot of significant ideas about art and she has clarified for me various challenges within my work. Willie Osterman has pushed me, challenged me and confused me to arrive at good solutions. Angela Kelly’s knowledge has directed me to many new ideas. I wish to express my gratitude to my committee members for their support and advice. It has been invaluable.

I would like to recognize my graduate colleagues who have showed interest and generosity and have encouraged and advised my work. Finally, a heartfelt thank you to my parents and family for their sacrifice and emotional support throughout my graduate studies.

Dedicated

To

My parents (Ho-San Lee and Yong-Soon Kim) and my family

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1.1 Introduction

The primary goal of my thesis project entitled “New Reading,” is based on the idea of trying to make a subject of still life using various books that I have painted to create a unique subject. I have been exploring the art of the still life for the last five years. Still life can be defined as a collection of one or more inanimate objects that are arranged by the artist, the photographer or by circumstance. Still life requires total control over every aspect of the composition—setting up the display with objects and lighting and deciding with exposure how to take the photograph. While some compositions may be complex, others can be simple. In my experience, both approaches can be dynamic and effective.

Photography is one of the most historically important mediums in recognizing the sense of sight. It has expanded the possibility of expressing artistic intent. It has also influenced other fields of media, including painting and installation. However, in photography and art, the genre of the still life has faced challenges. Today, the still life in photography is a subject that is becoming more neglected. One of the reasons is that still life photography is also used in commercial photography. But in fine art photography, the still life does not only represent the capture of the true likeness but also incorporates the personality of the individual. Perhaps we can look to developments in new imaging technologies to raise the status of the still life in photography to a new place in still life images. New digital technologies, such as software, scanners and printers, provide new opportunities to develop a new still life aesthetic, because they would give credence to the still life to create the images with digital manipulation and correction such as lighting, color and value via the computer.

The purpose of my thesis is to analyze the important representation of still life photography in consideration of its historical background, my interest and creative process, and today's digital and printing technological boom. I will illustrate what function and value is in my work and how it is related to my work through still life paintings and photographs. In technological development, I seek to resolve the new meaning of still life photography, such as the digital process for output and how to maintain still life as fine art, how to balance relations between the self and the world, and how to attain a satisfactory understanding of still life.

In my still life work, I want to express my sensibility to space and feeling. Drawing upon the paintings of the early twentieth century, I have tried to replicate respects of the enormous range of their aesthetic and philosophical thought. My work seeks to express abstract still life photography with elements of Modernism and Postmodernism. I search for the substance of objects and non-essentials are abandoned. Giving various meanings, I endeavor to create works in which form, shape and line are direct and strong, integrated with harmonious colors.

2.1 Why my interest in still life?

When I started learning about still life photography, I was always looking to find my own way in the art world. I wanted to create a new order because I always thought that my photographs were too conventional. As Brian Wallis wrote in his essay "What's wrong with this picture?" "Modernism is exhausted; its once provocative or outrageous products lie entombed in the cultural institutions they once threatened and offended." *1)* Working with my project, I realized that I needed a deeper aesthetic experience to change

my pictures and their established modernistic order. Since coming to study in America, I learned a lot about how to see the art world, what is the territory of art, and why we need art. Keeping these ideas always in mind, I have attempted to find different perspectives on photography by exploring the genre of still life, although there are many interesting photographic subjects such as landscapes, portraits, documentary, and digital photography. I needed to develop new strategic plans for my approach to still life photography.

I am interested in still life photography because it embodies the borderline between fact and fiction. I know many photographers contend with implied veracity, so they are always inventing other realities. To me, straight photograph does not literally replicate a scene because there is a transition that breaks from reality. The still life genre is an effective tool: It can imply a real situation, while opening the world to imaginary possibilities. Importantly, it is another way to communicate the meanings and feeling that I want to convey.

Another interesting aspect is that still life photography is a wonderful genre to develop and hone a vision. I do not need to leave the house or travel to any distant place. I can take my time with the subject and manipulate the objects on the tabletop. Everyday objects hide their beauty. Although we see them every day, we rarely look closely or examine everyday objects in any creative way. I begun my study of still life by researching the works of many painters and photographers—Paul Cezanne (1839-1906, France), Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890, Netherlands), Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964, Italy), and photographers, Josef Sudek (1896-1976, Czech), Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976, America), unique artists of Minimalism, Zeke Berman (1951- , America), and Robert Mapplethorpe

(1946-1989, America)—I was also inspired by the paintings of Post-Impressionism and Expressionism, which were art movements that paved the way for the avant-garde in the twentieth century. By studying these movements, I have learned about abstraction, which emphasized fundamental design principles such as proportion, color, positive/negative space, shape and symbolic/metaphorical meanings. The still life enabled me to reach for new imaginary expressions in photography.

2.2 Why does the still life continue to be an important genre?

The genre of still life is an important topic not only in art history but also for photography as a whole. The still life offers a unique representational index not only of artists' interests and formal concerns, but also of their time. In any era, the term still life means virtually the same thing: "the depiction of objects that lack the capacity for self-governed motion" (Kahr, 1993, p.190).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the still life became a specialist genre and an art form in Northern European countries, including the Netherlands. Still life paintings most often were aimed at a market of wealthy buyers, particularly those who prospered through trade. The subjects for still life were often simple and commonplace such as flowers, fruit, books, foods, etc. These familiar things were rendered symbolic. They offered meaning tied to morality, religion, and culture. Experiments have been made to extend the range of the genre and to seek methods of involving the viewer.

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, artists, including Paul Cezanne (1839-1906, France), Salvador Dali (1904-1989, Spain), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973,

Spain), and Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964, Italy), greatly experimented with the established pictorial forms of the still life. They played with aspects of perspective and reality to construct a new pictorial view of familiar objects. A view wholly in step with their day and concerns of pictorial composition, the two dimensional pictorial surface, meaning and vision. They wanted to express abstract and metaphysical pictures. Photographers such as Man Ray (1890-1976, America) and Andre Kertesz (1894-1985, Hungary) in their turn pushed back the boundary lines. They adapted the ideas of contemporary art movements to express still life, technically and artistically working with the arrangement of light, exposure and the range of darkroom skills to also address ideas of fact/fiction, reality/illusion, and two dimensional/three dimensional pictorial display.

Today, contemporary Postmodern artists challenge the fundamental ideas of traditional still life photography. They question aspect of beauty, meaning, and pictorial forms that have informed traditional ways of representing still life. Thus, the still life in photography is changed because Postmodern ideas reject the traditional for the new. As the concept of representation changes, the truthfulness and authenticity about the representation of still life photography changes as well. In this respect, the representation of still life photography begs the essential question about the photographic object, which is subjective, ambiguous, narrative, and arbitrary.

Exploring the ideas of still life in an historic aspect, I am aware that still life is an evolving system of representation and meaning. I am still struggling with this transformation: what is the nature of reality? Studying photography and art history over the past two years, I began to see that it was time to change my previous manner in which I worked and thought about photography.

2.3 Inspiration

“He repeatedly worked on the same subjects for long periods and constantly repainted and revised his pictures displaying his own lack of satisfaction with his art. Paul Cezanne found in still life the perfect vehicle for his revolutionary explorations in geometric spatial organization.”²⁾

www.arts-studio.com/cezanne.



Figure1, Paul Cezanne c. 1890-92, 28.5x16.5inch, Norton Simon Museum. Pasadena, CA

Figure2. A sketch, 2000, 6.9x10.8 inches.

Paul Cezanne was an influential figure in helping to determine my ideas about the still life. I was fascinated by his particular style that is concrete forms contained in space and light. The inspiration for me was that Cezanne's focus was to create and explore pictorial techniques not previously used, such as the re-interpretation of

traditional perspective. Cezanne emphasized the reality of the two dimensional painted surface, not the three dimensional painted window view of the world. I started to see the still life in a different way and I would use Cezanne's re-interpretation of pictorial space and surface in creating my photography.

I had sketched the most interesting subject to me in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, CA. Although there were many interesting genres in the museum, such as various kinds of Renaissance paintings, various portraits in an expressionistic style, and landscapes and still life in impressionistic and modernistic styles, my eye kept returning to a floral still life by Cezanne. At that time, I didn't know why. After seeing the work of Cezanne *Tulips in a vase* (figure1), I drew it in my sketchbook (figure2). I found myself attracted to incorporating his aesthetic elements of still life, and I was also interested in his unique treatment of space, mass, value, texture and color to create an illusion of a constructed reality. I also liked the way light fell on objects, creating something more solid and durable. There was also the painting's tonality, which resonates with psychological feeling. After traveling to the museum and seeing the painting, I began to see new ways to approach my photography by emphasizing, stressing and exploring. I found out how to make the photography that I want.

“Interview: what do you think of abstract painting?

Answer: abstract painting has given us some very important works, if we think, for example, just to name one, of Paul Klee....early Cubism... Braque.... Picasso....

In my opinion, nothing is abstract. In fact, I don't think there's anything more surreal or more abstract than reality.” 3)

Interview with Giorgio Morandi for the
“Voice of America” recorded on the 25th April 1957,
from www.museomorandi.it

Another painter who impacted my work is Giorgio Morandi. I was drawn to use his metaphysical idea “nothing is abstract.” He is considered to be one of the greatest



Figure 3. Giorgio Morandi *Still Life*, c.1955, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Lenart in honor of Rusty and Nancy Powell, 1997.



Figure 4. Untitled, 24x31.4 inches, 2004.

masters of still life painting. To me, his painting has a mystic and poetic feeling towards the nature of the object. His conceptual ideas touched me deeply. I kept his work close to my heart. I learned pictorial skillful techniques from Cezanne and from Morandi, how to make more thoughtful, psychologically forms filled with emotional nuance and purpose. Morandi probed the innate beauty and drama of the simple still life object, which he continually explored throughout his career. His paintings modify traditional form and subject matter by depicting objects at perfect rest on the flat surface. Of a table, the vase and blocks are treated monochromatically to give the appearance of sameness and coherent unity. This is a conceptual dimension through which Morandi investigates the contours of line and space.

3.1 My thesis exhibition

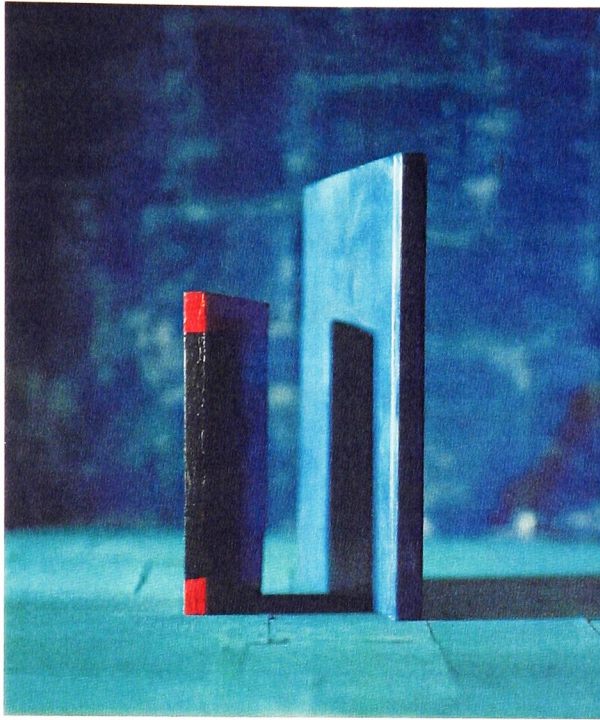


Figure 5. Untitled, 40x34 inches, 2005

In my thesis work, I took as subject of the book. This subject constitutes significant meaning in my artistic work, representing both figurative and abstract explorations. I attempt to visualize and relate the world around me through the book. It is for me the means to evoke emotions in my work. Prior to creating my thesis exhibition *New Readings*, I thought of what direction I should take for the show, what aesthetic possibilities could be illuminated, and what the work might suggest. I wanted to express the ambiguity that exists in reality and in photographic representation between the imaginary and the factual. To create my subject, I painted on books that were familiar to me. I used subtle colors and illumination to produce moods or sensations of beauty, ambiguity, and to create tension. As a modernistic aspect, I employed essential elements

of color, shape, and form to describe minimal and formal display. As a postmodern aspect, I attempted to create theatrical effects in a spectacle of presentation and perception, as well as an ambiguity of vision. Color also emphasizes an illusion of two-dimensional space—the surface of the photographic image. Color is a major impetus in my work. It sets a distinctive tone and supports my psychological intent for my work.

I chose to use books as my subject matter because they are filled with great meaning. Physically, they are containers of human knowledge and wisdom. Psychologically, they convey aspirations and enlightenment, the possibilities of the written word. The book has subtle elements to demonstrate my capacity for discovering immense complexity within self-imposed limitations of my practice. The book can be defined as shapes, color, volume and texture in visual representation. However, in my work, the book suggests much more. By painting on books, I changed their identity. They no longer serve their primary function to be read. The book is an ordinary object that everybody has experience with, due to its educational use. In school, people have bad and good memories of books. We used them on an everyday basis like listening to music. In my work, it was important to take a commonplace object like a book and make it unfamiliar and extraordinary. The book became a significant tool for me as a pictorial metaphor of the beauty of the written word contained between the book's cover. By meditating on a book's form and surface, I attempted to create a visual language of calmness, quietude and contemplation. In these images, I sought to understand the

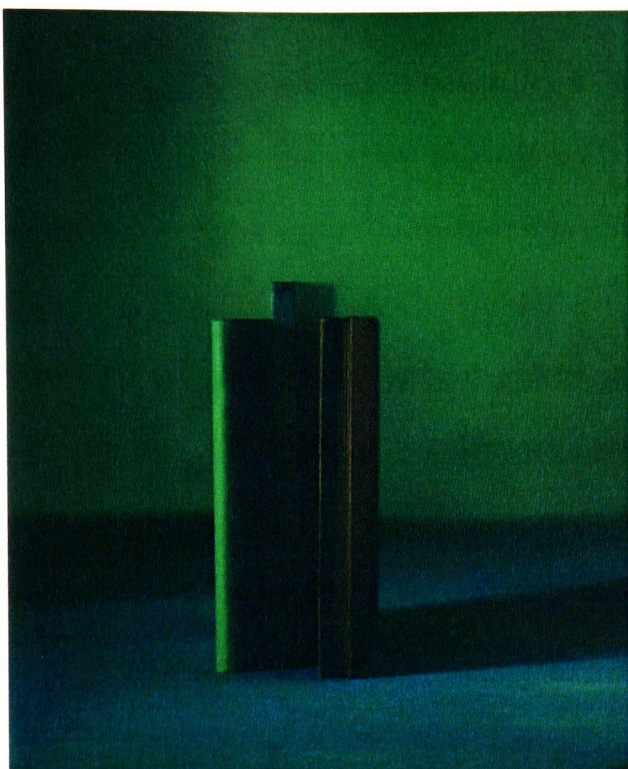


Figure 6. Untitled, 30x36.6 inches, 2005

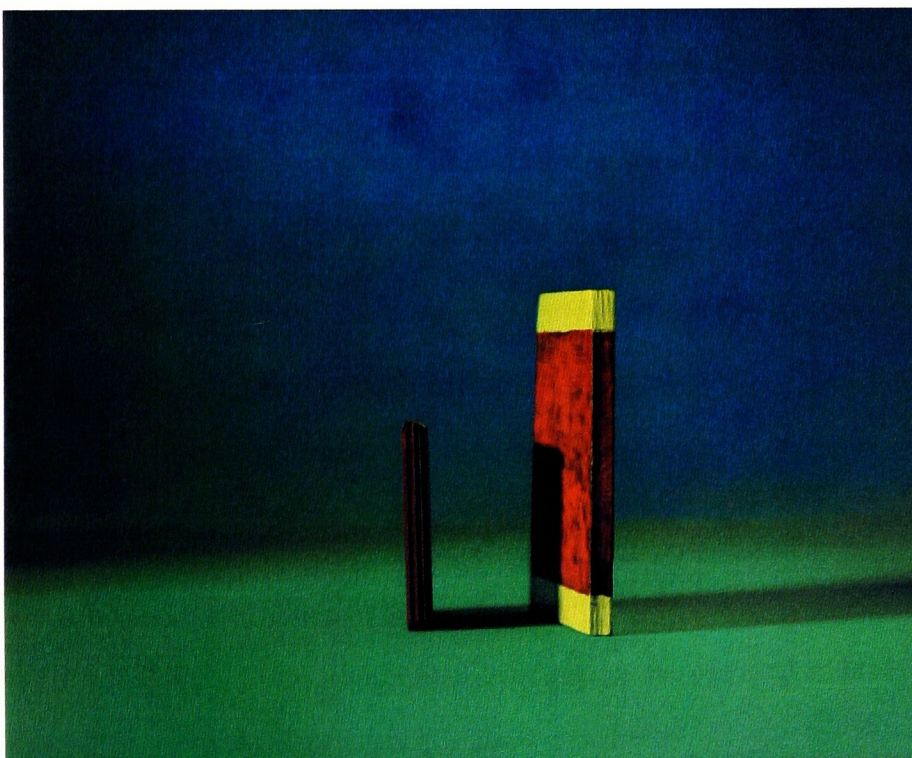


Figure 7. Untitled, 30x36.9 inches, 2005

physical nature of the book and the psychological meanings it might convey when its identity and function is changed. Creating a visual language in my work, I have tried to create both physical and psychological symbols in a more than general understanding of what the book means.

Using theatrical lighting, I created a dark mood to express an ominous environment. In this environment, I also wanted to suggest a surreal presence with mysterious and dreamlike effects.

I used digital output to realize my final prints because it created an “ink on paper” effect, as that found in traditional printmaking. The development of digital technology has made it possible for me to push the limits of my photographic work. I printed my images bigger than life size. With large big prints (40x36.4 inches), I was able to transform the subject of my still life, further emphasizing the book’s changed identity and function. Color also becomes exaggerated. In contrast, the small print gives a sense of intimacy, but can also show little detail of the artwork. I wanted to exploit detail through size, as well as the ink on paper surface of my work, to a more aesthetic effect. Using 4x5 and 6x7 camera formats to heighten perception, perspective and two dimensional plane, I sought simple, abstract spatial arrangements.

In addition, I find myself attracted to incorporating aesthetic elements of stillness in my work. “It’s not having what you want, it’s wanting what you’ve got.” is a Zen saying that has greatly influenced me. These aesthetic elements are realized in significant compositions, balancing color, background and lighting, the physical and the psychological in my thesis work.

3.2 Graduate experience

I was in an airplane leaving my family in Pasadena, CA, in the summer of 2003, when I thought of what I needed as an artist and where I wanted to go with my work. I was both serious and frightened by the future. I once told my wife that going to RIT might be an opportunity to change my life as an image-maker. I had been a commercial photographer. However, I realized that I needed more study in order to hone my body of work, because first, I needed to explore new artistic territories; secondly, photography was changing so quickly, the medium required more knowledge and expertise; thirdly, I had many ideas, but I didn't know how to bring them to fruition. I needed someone to point out when I was pursuing a worthy artistic path.

Craving for more studies in art and photography, I thought that RIT would be the perfect place to develop my talents and to become familiar with all aspects of photography. RIT students receive individual attention and direction, and thus the school would help me to produce the professional results that I wanted. I have learned to enhance my imagination from various professors, experiments, and books. That is the primary currency of the artist. It was good for me to come up with ideas that opened the world to new possibilities. I have come to know that I need the freedom to explore and to risk failure. Attending RIT was the next important step to achieving my goals.

I took many classes related to my work including the photography core, history & aesthetic photography, and digital output, etc. I was increasingly excited about the new art world I had entered, and learning the new communicating skills so I might better articulate my ideas. By meeting excellent professors who are breaking new artistic

ground, I was able to explore and develop my work and its meaning. Another significant learning experience was the ability to improve my teaching skills, which includes the ability to integrate new methods and techniques, although I haven't yet started teaching.

I am changing, growing, and struggling to realize new knowledge and understanding in my image-making. I often feel a compulsive need to do photography because it is the only way I know to communicate my ideas and my worldview.

-Still life I

I continued my interest in the genre of the still life to express myself and to practice my talents in photography. This is a subject I have pursued for the last five years. For me, the still life resonates with similar compositional challenges and expressive nuances or found in abstract paintings, including those of Paul Cezanne, Wassily Kandinsky, Salvador Dali, and Giorgio Morandi.

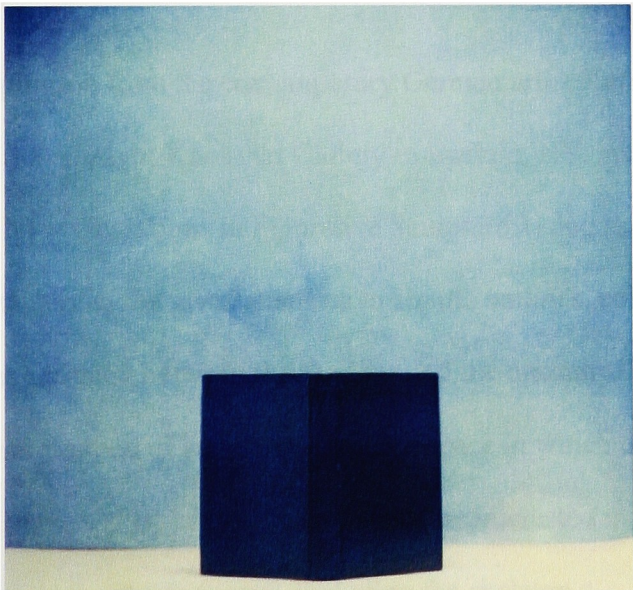


Figure 8. Untitled 40x37.6 inches, 2003

My first creative process is to take a single, simple object that is familiar and to make it unfamiliar or new to the imagination by placing it against a wall that I have painted as a background. I then photograph this still life, often searching for the mysterious effects of illusion or abstraction.

Striving for substance, I work with books, and painted backdrops that have simplified form and lines that are direct, while complementing harmonious colors I employ. Non-essential, decorative elements are eliminated for a direct, expressive simplicity of the composition.

I tried to create still life images that bridge the gap between strict realism and complete abstraction. As far as I have experienced, the still life is a kind of manner of visual interpretation that speaks not only to the beautiful but to reality in the renderings of static objects.

-Portraits

I received inspiration from the contemporary German artist Katharina Fritsch, whose work I saw at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY, in an exhibition called *Bodily Space: New Obsessions in Figurative Sculpture*. Using skeleton and sculptures in her installations, she gives attention to simple outlines, color, scale, and space creating a strange tension between the familiar and the uncanny. These elements play a role in the transformation of her objects and the space in which they have been installed. I was very impressed by her work, and I became interested in incorporating sculptural elements in my developing work, including the skeleton.

As a complement to my still life work, I began to explore portraiture and the importance of sculptural form, like the human figure. My basic concept was the idea of how a portrait creates a personal narrative, based on the self in this body of work. I wanted to explore and try to reinterpret the human figure in the use of a skeleton.

My basic concept was to depict “portraits” involving various forms of narrative strategies. As in *Untitled* (figure 9), 2004, the primary subject of the skeleton conjures up subjective, metaphorical qualities. It can appear as a metaphor of obsessive personal attitudes and a negative prospective. It can also express an ambiguous reality that exists between the imaginary and factual form. What is fact? What is fiction? In this approach, I became obsessed with my subject and began to address aspects of myself, including fear, responsibility and self-conscious nature. For the first time, in this work, I found myself reinterpreting and redefining who I am and what I do as a working artist.



Figure 9. *Untitled*. 11x 56.7 inches, 2004

In support of my work, I drew inspiration from Fritsch’s installations and art history books, especially those that illustrated sculptural figures from the Medieval Art. Also, I was interested in furthering my exploration of Postmodern ideas such as subjectivity, fragmentary, and the arbitrary. These diverse elements of the past and present helped to guide my work, which employed both color, black and white, and the

overall anxiety that appears throughout. My compositions were taken both outdoor and indoor.

Using the skeleton to incorporate myself in the work, these “portraits” deal with anxiety and obsession. At the time of the series making, I was struggling to know what my unique approach in art would be, what direction it would take. These portraits provided me with the opportunity to be more personal in my work, to explore my frustration with finding an aesthetic approach, etc.

I furthered my interest in portraiture in my next body of work in which I abandoned the skeleton for an actual human model. I met my subject on a street in the city of Rochester. I looked for a person who displayed an average look that I could manipulate and transform, working within a studio setting that allowed me to devise and control the scene. I asked my model to do poses, which I had created in my mind.

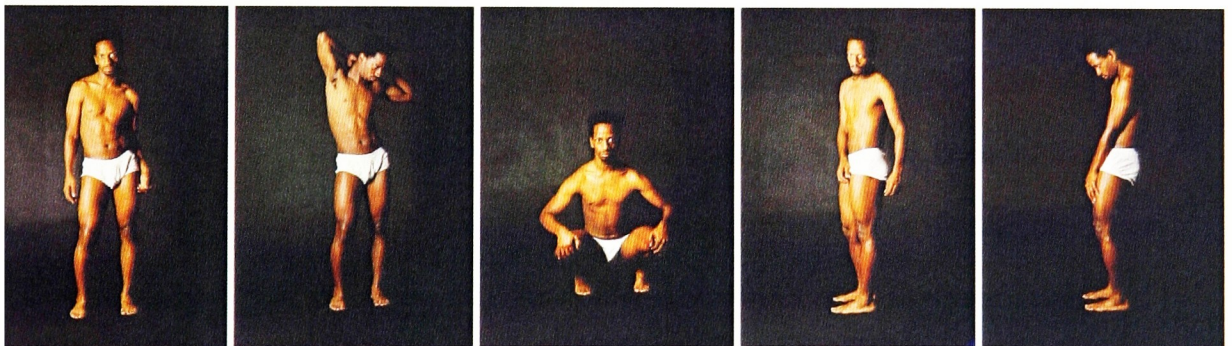


Figure10. Untitled, 2005

In the series of five large color photographs (figure 10), I created a sequence of figurative portraits that utilized certain forms of pose and narrative strategies. I show a young adult embracing himself. When I took these pictures, my subject was very shy and fearful. He didn't open his mouth to speak at all. It was as if he couldn't adapt to his setting, to me or the camera. At that time, I wondered what made him react in this way. I wanted to create

a relationship with my subject, using certain forms of our interaction in the studio to present a story. When I took a photography workshop class with Professor, Angela Kelly at RIT, she suggested that the parts of the human body and making gestures of form from the body could be symbolic in political and cultural issues. In this point of view, creating various forms of the figure represented a personal history, based on an obsession and anxiety in my mind. At that time, I couldn't find the right solution for my work and I was struggling about what I needed in my work. I spent a lot of time reading various articles, related to the ideas of postmodernism, instead of taking pictures, including hyperreality of Jean Baudrillard, the ideas of Fredric Jameson, who used both psychoanalysis and Marxism to interpret his project, and photography and postmodernism of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, to name a few.

I wanted to express an abstract portrait based on symbolic poses of the body. When I looked at his eyes on the street, he had a certain fear of something. I could not stop thinking of what I saw in that person. I didn't speak of it immediately but held that presence to my heart. And it could be my anxieties and desire that transcended into the images. Using the model, I wanted to express my anxiety and desire through him in an effort to get at something more real than the accurate depiction of a subject. I sought to collapse the barriers between subject and object, form and content, self and other, the viewer and the work. I inserted my own thinking, my own interpretation, and making associations. The subject is no longer himself but my interpretation of a form.

- Still life II

Influenced by Giorgio Morandi, known for his subtle and contemplative paintings, I returned to books as the subject matter for my thesis exhibition. I was intrigued by Morandi's painted realities, which appeared familiar to that age, but were uncanny and mysterious in their intense deliberation of object and space. I also wanted to work in this manner, to achieve painterly effects, and to combine realism and abstraction through fact and symbol.

My work attempts to depict still lifes that are illusions of color on a two dimensional surface. I am interested not only in the arrangement of books but also in the space created between them and around them. In this work, I wanted to express the ambiguous reality that exists somewhere between the imaginary and factual form. I painted on the objects that were familiar to me, especially books, again changing their identity as objects of the written word and their function in the world. Color helps emphasize an illusion of two-dimensional space rather than a three-dimensional, perspectival view. Using bright and saturated colors in a psychological way not only conveys illusion but emotion as well. Here I wanted to create playful compositions of beauty. Space is also particularly important, with negative space representing absence and books representing presence. My work has been considered by those who see it as having a theatrical expression. Perhaps, this is because I was influenced by a variety of diverse movies and the lightings on European still life paintings of 16th and 17th centuries. In large color printings, I seek to know the inner origins of thought and space and am fascinated by the concept that all form is born of thought and that thought returns to

create new forms.



Figure11. Untitled, 24x29.9 inches, 2005.



Figure12. Untitled, 24x29.4 inches, 2005.



Figure13. Untitled, 24x29inches, 2005.

I wanted to try to explore new directions in visual culture, painting on the books that are such a part of visual culture. This is an important aspect of books, especially the illustrated books in my work such as the conversation between painted books and painted backdrops as a conversation between what the books were and what they are now, having been changed for pictorial effect. Perhaps what is more theatrical is that I work as a director, setting the scene, locating the books, painting both books and backdrop. As a director, I have complete control from set-up, composition, and to the final point.

- Minimalism

Another influence upon my thesis work was the art movement of Minimalism. I was particularly intrigued with the treatment of form in Minimalism. By eliminating decoration and embellishment, form was created simply by emphasizing the essential formal aspects of shape, silhouette, contour and color. I researched work by Minimal artists, including Richard Serra (1939-), Donald Judd (1928-1994), Tony Smith (1912-1980), Carl Andre (1935-), and Robert Morris (1931-). Through their work, I saw how they

created highly refined objects and installations that raised questions about the essential character of objects in the world, human perception of form and space, and reception of an audience to a new kind of object making.

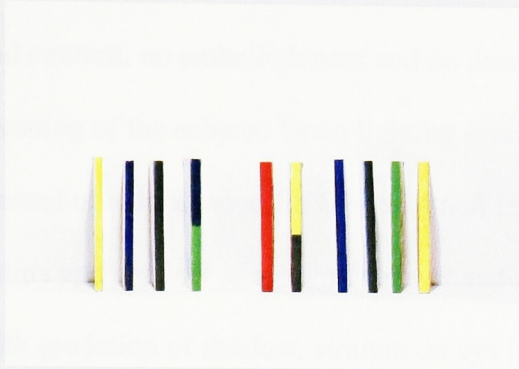


Figure14. Untitled, 16x22.4 inches.

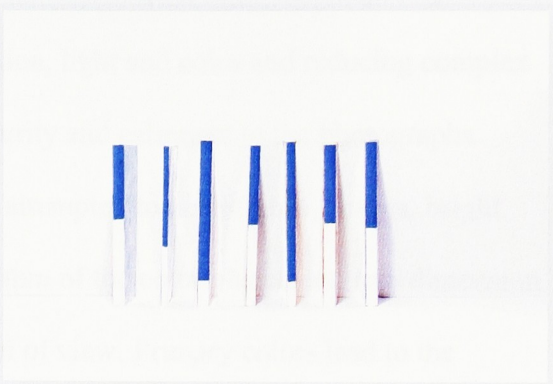


Figure15. Untitled, 16x23 inches, 2005

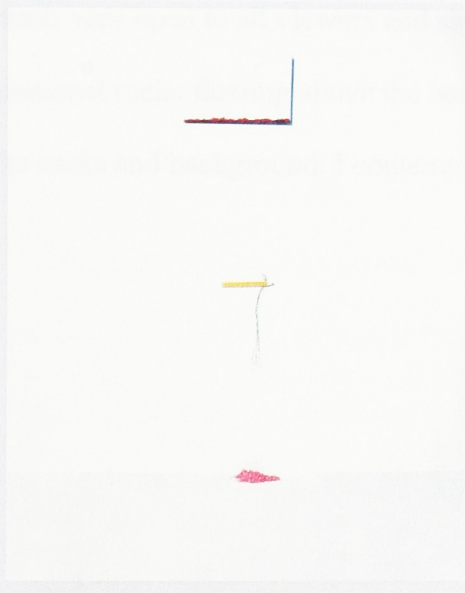


Figure16. Untitled, 11x13.7 inches, 2005.



Figure17. Untitled, 11x13.2 inches, 2005

Kenneth Baker’s Minimalism, the art movement is defined as:

“as a movement in the 1950s and continued through the

Sixties and Seventies. It is generally a term used to describe paintings and sculpture that thrive on simplicity in both content and form. The aim of Minimalism is to allow the viewer to experience the work more intensely without the distractions of complicated composition, theme and so on". 4)

In figure 14 through 17, aspects of Minimalism that I adapted were the simplicity of form and content, no embellishment and no decoration, light and color and reducing complex meaning of the subject. Open lighting gives purity and calmness to the photographs instead of a dark mood. In figure 14 and 15, I attempted to depict lines, shapes, bright colors and shallow spaces, movement and rhythm of the color placement, two dimension with gradation of shadow, straight on eye level of view. Primary colors lead to the objects. In figure 16, there are vertical and horizontal contrast, solid and the soft powder contrast; very open to all viewers and simple with fine detail. In figure 17, there are dimensional rocks floating above the background and using the blue and yellow powder on the rocks and background, I contemplated in a universal world of Zen.

4.1 The tabletop

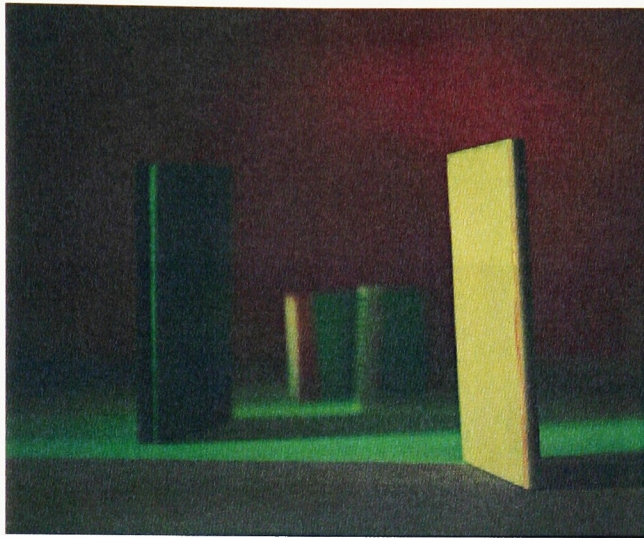


Figure18, untitled, 30x36.5 inches, 2005

In my studio, the tabletop constitutes a small world on which to create my still life scenes, based on the real and the imaginary. Like still life artists before me, my work reflects what is in my mind and what is in the world. Thus, there are two ways in which I work with a still life: 1) to construct a scene in which reality is referred through the use of familiar objects, and 2) to critique this worldly referent by interjecting the out-of-the-ordinary, the imaginary, suggesting the unreal. The tabletop setting of my work not only allows a great amount of control, but also enables me to be more versatile with my subject. The tabletop can be changed into anything, anytime, and anyway that I want. To do my work more efficiently, I have a tabletop set up in the basement of my apartment. I gather my subjects from around me-books, some toys, figurines, sculptures, etc. simple and functioned objects that when placed on the tabletop take on a new aesthetic reality. To emphasize this new reality or identity as aesthetic objects in a newly defined aesthetic

space of the tabletop, I paint on the objects. In figure 18, I chose a greenish color to make an illusion of anonymity on the background and the book's surface with light, and the color reflecting with light gives an unnaturalistic image.

- Background

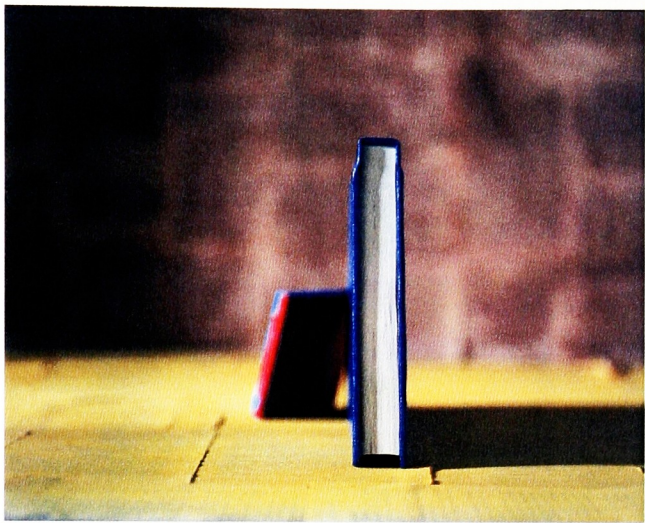


Figure 19, Untitled, 30x37.5 inches, 2005

In regarding still life images, it is apparent the background is an important and integral part of the compositional work. Working in my studio, I spent a lot of time preparing the background to stand as a great element in supporting my use of light and arrangements of objects. It becomes the backdrop, the stage against which my objects assert their presence. I considered the color, the depth of tone, and how the light interacts with the background surface that is painted.

Although there are various materials for the background such as canvas, paper, and fabrics, in some works I choose to use the pages from books I read and attached them on boards and wood, then painted on them using pastel and oil colors. The background

for building the still life was next examined from the camera position to prevent glaring patches or small hot spots, which are readily seen in the ground glass of the 4x5" camera or focusing screen of the 6x7" camera. The camera was positioned at a straight on level, a little above the tabletop level looking downwards. The management of the background lighting is very important in the unity of my thesis images and the simple part of the background, for it is the means for adjusting the tone and texture for the objects in the still life.

-Lighting

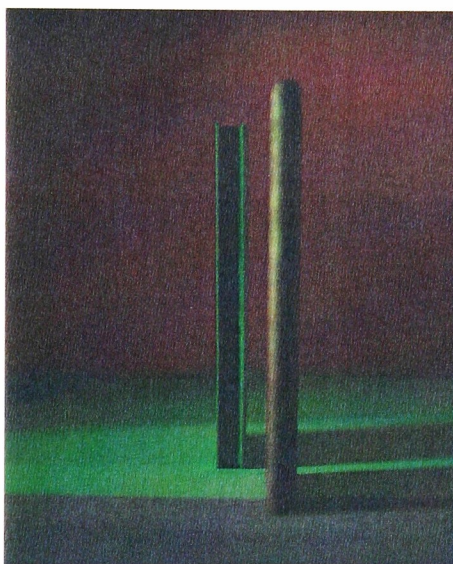


Figure 20, Untitled, 30x36.8 inches, 2005

Rendering illumination is a very critical element to support the main objects of my still life. It requires not only knowledge of natural and artificial light, but also patience! To create effective light, I used a reflecting board to solve the problem of bright highlights and deep shadows. This can be seen in the work "Untitled 21" in which light is natural. Shifting the light can make a variety of changes in the appearance of objects such

as contrast to reveal a textural surface. It helps also to enhance how the objects have been painted and thus changed. Having a shadow cast by a light source presents a specific mood and feeling to the object and throughout the entire composition. The greenish color in my work determines the contrast and the sense of depth. The color with the play of light created a spatial illusion separating the books from background. Although the meaning of the green color is comfortable, clean, and clam, I created muddy images with light to make dreamlike. I should refer to how light creates not only mood but also color. The mood of mystery made by the dark lighting and the color contributes to the dream feel. The saturation of color makes the images rich and draws your eye to it. So watching the lighting carefully has a great effect on the whole concept of the photograph.

- Objects

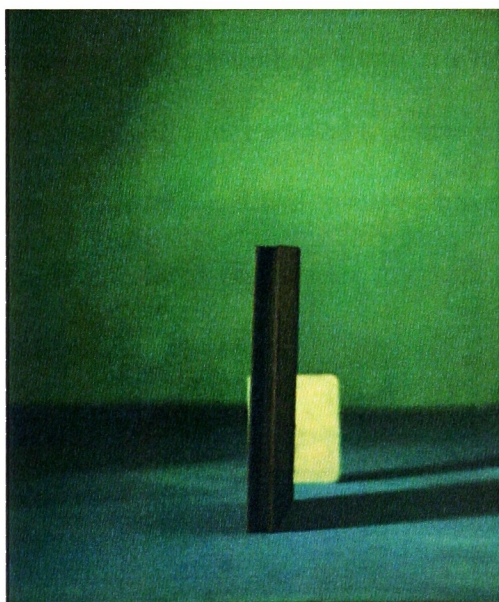


Figure 21, Untitled, 30x35.9 inches, 2005

Books chosen for the still life arrangement can be used to make a composition that appeals to the eye or to tell a story or to illustrate theme. In my use of books, I sought

to reduce their literalness and transform them into symbolic or metaphorical objects through painting, light, and compositional arrangement. I always thought of how to relate to one painted object to another. Then, to the background, light became the unifying factor that informed both object and background. I also make an effort to create a kind of tension within the interplay of the books by theatrically creating a painterly effect. This helped to create a more symbolic stance in my work, based on psychological emotions and feelings. I had spent a lot of time arranging my compositions as a major aspect of my professional output. I like working slowly, building my work to make a satisfying composition of light and object until I find a combination that elicits an emotional response.

As I worked on my thesis images, concepts drawn from Eastern Asian art informed my minimalistic arrangements and the use of light and color. These concepts include creating a meditative empty space; eliminate almost my reference to the outside world by painting my objects. In my still life, I wanted to create simple, direct forms that caused a viewer (including myself) to stop and look contemplatively on the essential building blocks of natural and artistic form. In this way, my work enhances a Zen-like character of personal and intellectual exploration.

-Color

Color is a powerful tool that has many uses in my work. It can be used psychologically to draw attention, create a mood, and enhance clarity in the work. When I started to use color I didn't know much about it because I've never studied its



Figure 22, Untitled, 30x36.2 inches, 2005.

attributes based on quality of light and human perception. Before I was interested in still life photography to learn more about color, I mainly worked photographing portraiture and landscape. So to learn more about color, I started studying paintings of all kinds in museums, galleries, and a variety of books. I tried to recognize and relate the use of colors in images I saw. I usually looked at paintings of Post Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism. Concurrently, I was deciding how I would choose the colors for my still lifes, my paint for the books and the background. I realized that choosing the right color is very important, especially in how my painted surface would interact. In addition, the selection of light source, the light transitional spaces between my objects, and the effects of light on local color and cast shadow both informed and impacted the overall color of my compositions. The various colors I use in my work to create illusion are very significant in understanding my work. It can be represented in a symbolic, ambiguous, perceptive, and visionary mean. Contrasts of color and lighting

between background and foreground may help to project objects. I also used color to make an interaction throughout the image, to make a connection with the books

-Digital process for output

In contemporary culture, the digital revolution was triggered by the technological development of the computer, information and telecommunication industry. The digital brought about a wide variety of changes, especially in fine art photography. And I, for one, was greatly influenced by how the new digital practices in photography.

In my graduate and thesis work, I explored digital printing processes, like Epson and Lambda printing. I looked to combine traditional analog/darkroom technique with new digital practices, including computer software, scanning and printing. I wanted to expand the creative potential of the digital into the realm of fine art photography in my work. I realized that the digital print allows a new kind of pictorial representation, by combining aspects of the photographic and the post photographic. Experimenting with the digital print became a vital creative force not only in my work but in photographic art as a whole. As an alternative process, it introduces a new creativity, a new tool to photographers who wish to explore, in my case, new ink-on-paper print technology. To achieve the final prints for my thesis show, I scanned negatives and positives of my still lifes and uploaded them to Photoshop. I then outputted my new digital images to the 7600, 7900, and 10000 Epson inkjet printers. I learned quickly about color management and resolution to obtain prints equal in quality to prints using analog, fine art, and traditional methods. In the inkjet print, I found textures, detail and contrast that supported my subject matter in a better way. Unlike an analog print, the ink on paper process of

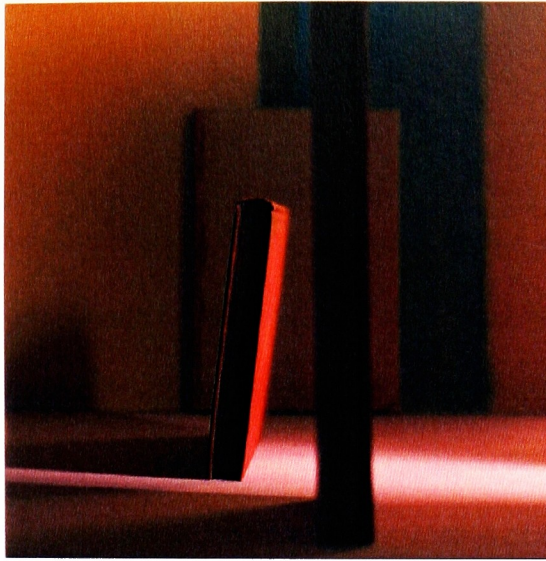


Figure 23, Untitled, 30x30.5inches, 2005

inkjet printing rendered my pictures giving texture of a painterly feeling more than a factual photograph. Because of this, my thesis work exhibited a new kind of aesthetic quality tied to traditional printmaking. I found that this approach emphasized the abstract character and individuality of my work. It did not heighten the photographic “real,” but instead spoke to the artist’s (my) interaction in the picture and to the handmade print. In this way, I brought more of myself into my still life prints.

Working on my thesis show, I realized that I needed to find out a new meaning for photography as an art form in a new digital world. In my studies, I learned that the digital remediates the analog, it emphasized immediacy, the desire for the real, and interactivity. It introduces a new post photographic era, in which the digital and analog are combined, as in my own work. My used digital process and printing technologies speak to this new photographic frontier, and to my interest in creating fine art images that are about both the traditional and new in photography. In my future work, I wish to further explore the digital in next stage of photography’s history.

Conclusion

In my graduate study, I cast aside my past artistic concerns and beliefs because I wanted to achieve a new direction in my photographic art. Seeing various art and photographic worlds, I have had a profound experience and have tried to follow my new path. I have met various photographers and artists, and explored their thoughts, feelings, experiences and passions. I really wanted to know the aesthetics of my own style so that I might be a better artist. Everyday, I created still lifes of my own vision, blurred portraits to understand the elements of Pictorialism, and self portraits to comprehend the ideas of Postmodernism. But what is next for me? I do not think much about it but I would like to combine all the elements that I have learned in my graduate work, to achieve greater artistic insights. I often think that art remains significant to human beings and I am attracted to the idea that now, anything can be art. As Lyle Rexler wrote, in *Only Skin Deep*: “I am not sure photographs can teach us anything we do not already know, but they can invite us to connect—and that is how they change the world.” 5)

Endnote

1. Brain Wallis. "*What wrong with this Picture? An Introduction*", Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, New Museum of Contemporary art Boston: D. R. Godine, 1984, P.xii
2. <http://www.arts-studio.com/cezanne>.
3. <http://www.museomorandi.it>. Interview for the Voice of America, 25th April 1957.
4. Baker, Kenneth, Minimalism: Art Of Circumstance/ Kenneth Baker 1946- . New York : Abbeville Press, 1988, P.32.
5. Lyle Rexer, "*Only Skin Deep*" Art on Paper, March/April, 2004, P.63.

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